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THE UNUSED ASSETS OF OUR PUBLIC RECREATION FACILITIES

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Of the fifteen cities, commencing with New York and ending with Washington, D. C., which had in 1907 a population of 300,000 or over, only four had over five per cent. of the city's land area in public parks. The average for the entire group was 3.8 per cent. In the second group of twenty-nine cities—the largest, Newark, N. J., and the smallest, Grand Rapids, Mich.—having a population of 100,000 to 300,000, only six had more than five per cent. of the city's land area in public parks, while the average for this group was only 3½ per cent. In the third group of forty-seven cities having a population of between fifty and one hundred thousand, the average park area was but 1.9 per cent. of the city's land, and the sixty-seven cities having a population of from thirty thousand to fifty thousand in 1907 averaged only 1.4 per cent.

Recognizing the tendency of population to concentrate and even to congest in every one of these cities, it is apparent that the existing recreation facilities must be utilized to the maximum if the city is to secure the largest returns for its investment.

The per capita expenditure for recreation in these four groups of cities was fifty-one cents in 1907, ranging from sixty-eight cents per capita in the first, thirty-six cents per capita in the second, thirty cents in the third, to as low as twenty cents per capita in the fourth or largest group of cities with populations between thirty thousand and fifty thousand. In the first two groups the cost of land for outdoor recreation purposes is a much more serious factor than in the smaller cities.

A serious danger arises in attempting to advocate the maximum use of recreation facilities that we shall ignore the right of a citizen, or at least forget temporarily his right, to have some diversity in his recreation. Among the institutions in our cities of which we first think as providing opportunity for recreation are playgrounds and parks. In every town with any considerable water frontage, whether on a river, a lake or on salt water, the possibility of the use of piers

as places of recreation deserves to be carefully considered. The school buildings, which have been heretofore largely relegated to the conventional forms of education, may be much more extensively utilized to develop the play instinct and various forms of relaxation or change essential to recreation.

It should be a fundamental business proposition in every city that as many hours' use as possible should be secured from every building, no matter what is supposedly its object, since it does not pay the city to carry investment in buildings which serve even as an ornament to a district—although our schools are altogether too frequently merely an eyesore and a mortification.

Among the uses to which public school buildings may be put, in addition to the regular routine classroom work, are:

First, and so obvious that it hardly deserves to be mentioned in connection with the recreation side of the community life, the use of the schoolrooms at night as study rooms temporarily for children whose parents are undergoing the cruel process of being Americanized to two- or three-room apartments. Upon the basis of substituting city property for a child's room at home and thereby following the precedent of subsidizing the employer of unskilled labor, this system is not defensible. From the point of view of giving the children of the immigrants who have recently come to American cities the individual attention in the preparation of their studies which their own parents are unable to give them, the system is not so entirely abhorrent and repulsive to the American sense of justice. This system of helping children in their studies inaugurated by settlements, I believe, is more a pedagogical problem than a recreation problem.

Second, the utilization of schools as social centers, which has reached its highest development in Rochester, where they have proven a most successful factor in democratizing the community and in creating a sense of social solidarity. It is merely an extension of the function of the school to include the interests of the adults and parents as well as the children of the community. This is superior, in my judgment, to the mere conduct of recreation centers, which is, however, a feature of the work of social centers, and an important item in the physical development of both the younger and older groups of a community.

Third. Roof gardens. These are often suggested as possible
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places of escape from the torturing heat of the tenement and the danger of the street. Here, again, however, an appeal to the common sense of figures shows that this is merely a makeshift, and that where there are six hundred children to the acre or even two hundred, and but ten thousand or twelve thousand square feet of area available on the roofs, it is evident that the minimum of thirty or the maximum of eighty square feet of playground cannot be secured for children.

Fourth. Vacant gardens and lots may in many sections of a community be reserved pending the increase in their land values for playgrounds for children, or for cultivation. This custom has been extensively carried out in foreign cities, notably in Berlin, and to some extent in Chicago and a few other American cities. The potato patch of Detroit has made the late Governor Pingree as noted as the turnip farms made Lord Townshend. This may be condoned as a temporary expedient in congested districts of cities such as are found in most American cities, where the real estate speculator has cheerfully sacrificed the rights of the community to his own interests, and where the community has wilfully ignored the claims of its poorer citizens.

Fifth. The utilization of piers has already been referred to as a possible method of providing space for children whose parents are compelled to live in undesirable districts. Even with a normal distribution of factories, which involves the most economic improvement of water frontage, the use of piers will probably be quite feasible along a seashore and on large rivers, and there will be opportunity for the children to have the advantages of a "boardwalk."

Sixth. Closed streets are often suggested as a substitute for parks and playgrounds, and, in the conflict now on between the real estate speculator and the citizens in American cities, it may be expedient to adopt this makeshift, and thus to get children used to the hard knocks they are bound to have on the streets. However, in view of the agitation for the curfew law, and in view of the folly of attempting to counteract the bad influence of the street by ethical instructions in the day or Sunday school, the irony of utilizing the street even in the daytime is fairly evident. Other makeshifts, such as the enlargement of fire-escapes on six-story tenements, and lattice-work playgrounds across narrow streets are possible.

We are not prepared to advocate the use of the yards of
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police stations and fire stations, nor can the open squares around statues, monuments and circles, be made adequate for the needs.

Why, it may be asked, with the present unused assets of our public recreation facilities, should there be this temporizing and makeshift policy on the part of American cities?

In small towns there is no excuse whatsoever for the failure to provide adequate space under normal conditions for the children of the neighborhood, but it is astounding to find that many of our smaller towns as well have very few public recreation facilities.

In New York City an expert in playgrounds has suggested that a six-, ten- or fifteen-story playhouse for children would be a God-send in the built-up districts. Such suggestions are so utterly in defiance of the laws of health as to bring a blush even to the most callous. Such buildings and cramping of living quarters go hand in hand. It would seem that we have reached the point where, instead of attempting to make apology for existing conditions, it is high time to seek rather to emphasize the right of the community to be healthy, which means to have adequate space and to live by light and not by twilight, to bring up its children on square feet and not on square inches, and to keep them within reasonable distance of the ground.

The unused assets for public recreation facilities in the future are to be the ample spaces about the homes of the people, when housing conditions have become what they ought to be and when factories are properly distributed.